

# A Warm Touch

By Robert R. Monroe

I make dolls.

I don't make toys. At least I don't make toys for little girls.

I'm in charge of hair placement at FantasyGirls, Inc. I make love dolls. I don't mean I make blow-up dolls that have more of a place at bachelor parties than bedrooms. FantasyGirls is the leading provider of ultra-realistic love dolls and masturbation aides. The company does its best to create the most life-like sex dolls possible. Realism is the key. The dolls are made of solid silicon, so they weigh as much as a real woman, or rather as much as most men wish real women weigh. The breasts are filled with a specially formulated silicon gel to perfectly imitate the density of actual breasts. Every body part is molded from actual women, mostly professionals in the pornography industry. Each doll comes with a warming lubricant to be used during intercourse. The hair, which I am in charge of, is actual human hair and each pubic hair is individually placed by hand. It can

take forever to complete a request for the “natural” style. Luckily, those are a very small minority of the order.

I can’t liken it to working in the sex industry. Sometimes when I walk into the warehouse where all the dolls are kept I get the sickening feeling that we are in the business of making dead bodies. From the front to the back, the factory’s rooms are filled with dolls in various states of assembly. In the molding studio, headless silicon bodies are hung by meat hooks like goods in Hell’s butcher shop.

The company name on the factory’s sign and my business card is Prime Designs, not FantasyGirls. Prime Designs does some work for movie studios who need specialty costumes but cannot afford the most prestigious workshops, but a majority of the company’s work is dedicated to the dolls. The factory itself lies on the border of the industrial and residential districts. To the north are fiery smoke stacks and angles of steel. To the south are small houses with small green yards. The suburbs slowly transform into forests and hills.

“Have you seen the review in *EPR*?” Bill, the factory manager, is standing at my office door. He’s a short man with a pointed nose and skin as inorganic as the dolls he sells. I don’t look at him at first. I have a hard time taking my eyes away from him. His body is a train wreck. His graying blonde hair combed over to the left side of his face, his poreless and reddened cheeks, and his sagging gut. He is always out of breath and I expect him to drop dead any second. I can’t help but stare. “Take a look! You’ll like what you read.”

He tosses the magazine onto my workstation, between me and the mons I was grooming. *The Eastern Porn Review* is the bible of every pervert along the coastal metropolitan area. Anything depraved, lustful, but

still legal is reviewed in the magazine's smudged newsprint pages. I open to the article in marked by a yellow strip of paper. Bill had the entire new line of dolls delivered to *EPR* in five casket-sized crates. The special treatment earned FantasyGirls a featured six-page review. The title reads: "The Perfect Playthings." The five dolls are photographed on a bed, posed to simulate various lesbian sex acts. Unlike most lesbian orgies to grace the *EPR*'s pages, these girls cannot feign any interest.

"I've got to get some shit fixed in accounting. Think you can get those new hair samples to me by three?" Bill begins to back away from my door.

I glance up briefly from the magazine. "Yeah, I'll have them ready."

A quick read of the article reveals the same old critique of the product. The faces are drastically improved and while the skin doesn't feel at all like an actual human being's, it's the best on the market. The vaginal and anal entries have been improved and the oral entry is "revolutionary for realistic love dolls." I flip to the end. The last page is completely dedicated to the improvements in hair. "Now, I tend to like my pussies clean shaven," raves the reviewer, "but the way the hair is placed on these things is a work of art! Better than the real thing!"

I close the magazine. I look to the spread open vulva on my workstation and in that thin pink slit I see the loneliness of all mankind.

I ride my bike to and from work. I haven't driven my truck since late last summer. The air conditioner gave out and made the commute an unbearable experience. I found riding my bike not only more comfortable but also far more efficient. When I told my mother my plan of alternate

transportation, she began to nag me about the neighborhood I live in and how it would be dangerous to ride a bike on those streets. I live in no ghetto, but no metropolis is safe enough for her only son. After riding the bike for four months I've become quite fond of it.

Of course, my mother does not know what it is I am commuting to and from. I tell my family that I work for a factory that is contracted by major toy companies for expert work. On special occasions I buy a doll for my mother, an expensive doll from a lesser known company, and tell her that I did some work on the model. She always tells me how proud she is of me. The dolls have invaded and conquered my parents' bedroom. My father doesn't seem to mind.

Between my apartment and the factory there is a gas station. I stop there every evening after work, pretending to stop for a drink. Really I'm stopping for the two women who are always there.

Every night Lorna works the register. She's a few years younger than me, probably still in college. I imagine she's a film student. She's got the most charming smile, as if she knows all your secrets before she knows your name. She reminds me of the girls I dated in college, classmates in the expensive art academy my parents sent me to. I flunked out after three years. I had no place studying sculptures or art theory. My work was always "too immature" for my professors anyway.

Lorna is pale, small and devilish. From what I can tell, Lorna dyes her hair black, but I don't dare ask. I have, however, asked about her piercing; a thin silver loop on the left side of her slender lower lip. I want to hold it between my lips.

I've been trying to get to know Lorna since the first time I bought gas from her. That was a year ago. I've done my best to charm her, not make myself look like an ass, but I get the feeling that I'm nowhere near landing a date with her. In college I didn't have problem getting girlfriends. I'm reasonably attractive, at least I'd been told so by half-drunk coeds painting their parents money away. Since meeting Lorna I've begun to wear my hair short and spiked. I keep a constant five o'clock shadow, just to add an air of mysteriousness and bohemian charm.

"How's it going, Kevin?" she asks me as she pretends to ring up my apple juice for the security cameras. Leopard print barrettes hold back her dark hair. Her hair only comes down to her chin and with the barrettes holding it back it forms a heart around her face. Lorna's not a beautiful girl, but she's cute as hell. She hands me the juice which I immediately open.

"I'm doing all right," I say. "How's Gloria?"

Lorna smiles and turns to look out the window. "She looks pretty content, especially with spring coming."

I follow Lorna's gaze to the woman sitting on the bench next to the payphone in the station parking lot. Gloria isn't her real name, but Lorna and I think it fits her. She's a homeless woman, dressed in rags from Salvation Army like a modern day gypsy. Her shoes are mismatched: one scuffed brown loafer and a disintegrating gray sneaker. Gloria's about fifty years old; her silver hair wildly standing on end like a gray spider perched on her head. Lately Gloria has been holding a small orange kitten and she's never seen without it.

Lorna and I, in our brief conversations, have constructed an elaborate fantasy life for Gloria. The basic points are that Gloria is the descendent of the missing Russian princess Anastasia and if she reveals her identity the

Russian government will have her killed. So she roams the streets of our city mastering an ancient form of gypsy magic, keeping the city warm and crime rates down. She stays around the gas station because she is creating a magical nexus behind the dumpster so she can travel back in time and save the Czar Nicholas from execution. The kitten she now cradles in her arms is her familiar and will continue her work in this era after Gloria has slipped into the past.

As I leave the station, I watch Gloria. She holds the kitten like an infant, kissing its soft head and whispering quiet words of love.

And just like every other time I see her, Gloria moves me to tears.

I watch television from the moment I get home to when I go to bed. Meals usually consist of leftover pizza or Chinese take-out or microwavable dinners. My mother is always calling and nagging me about not using my apartment's large, fully furnished kitchen. Then she nags about finding a good girl to use that large, fully furnished kitchen.

Prime Designs pays their artists well. That's what they call us: *artists*. Through the FantasyGirls website one can buy t-shirts that read "Art you can really appreciate." Unlike any other artist of any other level of integrity, I can afford a comfortable living, even if my spacious apartment is essentially bare. The living room, the largest room in the place, is divided in half. There is the weeknight half: just a black and white television I bought while in school, an armchair found on the curb, and a stand on which to set dinners and beer cans. On the floor near the television is a telephone and answering machine full of messages from creature workshops saying "thanks, but no

thanks.” The other half, the weekend half, is my home studio. A long workbench extends the length of the wall, half of it dedicated to the creation of my puppets, marionettes in particular. The other half is a gathering place of strange, colorful creatures with wide eyes and ever grinning faces. Sydney, an orange and black spider marionette, hangs from the ceiling above the workbench ready to leap onto my shoulders. But he would rather tell a joke than liquefy my innards with his venom. A mess of fabrics, wires and stuffing takes up a whole corner like the manure of a very large, very flamboyant elephant.

Around eleven o’clock a commercial for the new series of Mr. Jangles video tapes comes on. Mr. Jangles is the hottest franchise in children’s entertainment this decade. He’s a six-foot tall anthropomorphic creature covered from head to toe in thin yellow hair. I made all two dozen official costumes in use. Landmark, the company that owns Mr. Jangles fired me immediately after the costumes were completed. I did my job too well and made my position obsolete. Considering the intended use of the suits, the quality of the work and the number of available costumes, the company would never need another suit made for twenty years. By that time Mr. Jangles will be long forgotten.

I tried to get a job with another puppet making company, but in spite of Mr. Jangles’ success the children’s entertainment industry insisted that animation was the future. I took the job at FantasyGirls just until I could find a better and more comfortable outlet for my talents. That was two years ago.

Though I continued making puppets during the weekends for a while, I haven’t touched my studio for over three months.

A movie comes on after the late night talk shows. I missed the title but it follows the formula of the romantic comedy. Man frequents a coffee shop. Man develops a crush on a girl who works there. Man takes the girl out to a dinner and a movie and learns he has nothing in common with this dream woman. Man tries to become an ideal match for his crush. The girl loves him for who he is.

I turn off the television as the credits begin to roll. I sit there in the darkness, moonlight reflecting off the plastic eyes and synthetic hair of the half dozen puppets arranged around the room. A chimp marionette grins wildly from his perch on the television.

I think about Lorna for a few minutes. It doesn't take me long.

"I see you brought the truck today, Kevin. You must be tired of pedaling that bike here every day." Linda, who is in charge of breast installation, is standing at my office door. No one ever comes fully into my office. But I'm glad Linda doesn't. I think she smells like feces. I'm not the only one who thinks so. Everyone has a theory to Linda's unpleasant aroma, the most popular being that she has an extreme scatological fetish and never thinks of completely cleaning up after herself. She is mocked and ridiculed but never to her face. This place is full of people like Linda, people who wear their perversions on their sleeves, clear for all to see, but never are they confronted with their fetishes. Teri has cuts and burns all down her arm, an unrepentant masochist. Carl has been stealing spare feet. No dark secret is safe in this factory.

"No, I'm just staying late tonight and I don't want to ride the bike after dark." I'm looking through the orders for the day as Linda slips away.



Three blondes, one redhead, one brunette. Only two of them require any work done to the pubic area.

I finish today's orders by four and begin on the ones for tomorrow. I have to wait until seven, when Bill finally leaves, to be alone.

"What the hell are you still doing here? I thought you finished today's orders." Bill has his brief case in one hand, an issue of *Dom Magazine* in the other.

"I didn't have plans for tonight so I thought I would work on some demonstration models for the convention next month. I think this blue would really go over well." I nod to the doll on my workstation. She's modeled after a punk girl I once saw on a bus. "It's synthetic. The hair, I mean. It's made of plastic, but I think it feels pretty real."

Bill smiles, the right side of his lips lifting slightly more than the left. "She's cute. And if you think it feels real I'll trust you on it. You're the best in the biz, kid."

"Thanks."

Bill leans his bulk forward to get a good look at the doll's exposed vulva and the light blue hair applied in a V formation, a shining arrow to fulfillment. "Shit, Kevin, you really know your pubes. You must watch a lot of Norwegian porn."

Bill turns his back and leaves before I can respond. Three minutes later I watch his gray van leave the parking lot.

I walk to the warehouse, a small scrap of paper in my hand. I search down aisle after aisle of wooden crates, each one stamped "CAUTION" and a cryptic number is spray painted on the sides. The number tells what the doll looks like. The digits describe body type, skin tone, breast size, hair

color and style, pubic hair style and face type. After nervously searching for what seems like an hour I find what I am looking for.

Body type: petite

Skin tone: fair

Breast size: 34A

Hair color/style: black/short

Pubic hair: natural

Face type: C15 (“Princess”)

Back at my apartment, I set the doll up in my armchair. It isn’t a perfect match, but it’ll do. I think the biggest problem is the clothing it wears. Each FantasyGirl comes fully dressed in a black miniskirt, red blouse, and matching bra and panties. I find the old leather jacket I wore in college and put it on the doll. It gives the desired affect. It no longer looks like a glass-eyed, Times Square street walker.

“Um... Hi. How’s it going?” I can’t get any further before I am hit with an overwhelming sense of embarrassment. What am I thinking?

The doll isn’t even looking at me. Because of the solid silicon body it can only look straight ahead unless manipulated by the user. I’m surprised by how fake and lifeless it looks, even after people like Bill and Linda devote their lives to creating the perfect dolls.

But it doesn’t matter how real it is. The reason I brought it here is because it isn’t the real thing. I compose myself.

“Hey, um, I was wondering if you’d like to get coffee some time. No. That’s stupid... So, when do you get off tonight ‘cause...”

I cringe. This isn’t working.

I walk to the kitchen to warm up some pizza.

I try again and again to find some words I can say that don't sound ridiculous, trite, desperate or depressing. I pace back and forth, delivering line after line, each one more stupid than the last.

I give up some time after midnight. I sink to the ground, embarrassed, frustrated and tired. This hasn't gone as expected. I haven't found those magic words to woo every woman. I haven't been able to steady my body at the very idea of asking a woman out. I'm pathetic.

I sit there on the floor, leaning against the armchair, staring at the carpet. The white carpet looks like sand in the faint blue moonlight. My eyes slowly survey this miniature desert before arriving at a foothill. The doll's naked foot looks frightening realistic in the dark. I forget for an instant that it is made of silicon. I reach for the foot, brushing my fingers along the darkly painted toenails. In this brief touch the synthetic flesh almost feels real. It feels warm.

I turn to look at the doll's face. Its eyes are hidden in shadow but I can feel it staring at me. The permanent lipstick glistens in the moonlight. I can hear the doll whisper to me.

Slowly, I get to my knees and position my body between the doll's legs. I move its hair away from its face so that I can look into the eyes. The hair makes a heart.

I kiss the doll. I carry her to my bedroom.

"Hey, why the long face, kid?" It's Bill again, leaning his bloated mass against my door frame.

"Nothing. I'm just tired, that's all."

“Well, don’t let that interfere with your work.” He backs out to look up and down the hall. He slowly steps into the office, closing the door behind him. I stop working on the decapitated head on my desk. “You know you’ve become a real asset to the company,” Bill says. “I mean, every review we’ve gotten since you signed on has been raving about your work with the hair. Even those feminist bitches at *Dom* like what you’re doing.” He runs his fat fingers through the locks of a blonde doll waiting to be taken to wardrobe. He lets out one of his patented half-burp/half-hiccups. I cringe at the sound. “And I know you only came to work for us as a temporary job until you could start making puppets again, but I have to say I don’t want to see you go.” He closes in on me, hands me a piece of paper. “I’d like to give you a bit of a raise if you’d commit to us.”

I look at the paper. In faint pencil is a salary I’ve only dreamt about. Nodding, I set the paper down on the desk.

“Sure. Why not?”

On the ride back from the work I feel sick, sicker than I did this morning, waking up next to that doll. It’s like waking up to a murder.

I’ll be able to move out of the apartment, maybe get a nice place in the suburbs close to the country. I can buy a new truck, one I can enjoy. I can’t think of these things for too long. They don’t seem important right now.

I coast past the station, contemplating whether or not to go in. I’m not sure if I’m up to seeing Lorna today. The very thought makes me want to vomit.

I look around for Gloria. She's not at her usual spot by the dumpster or the bench. I'm looking behind me when I feel the bike roll over something. A flash of orange fills the corner of my eyes.

Stopping the bike I look behind me. Lying on the pavement, its chest flat against the ground is Gloria's kitten. Its back bounces as it gasps for air. Its back is broken.

"Charlie!" A hoarse voice rips me from my trance of horror. Gloria is over the kitten, her hands shaking, as if unsure what to do with the kitten's broken body. She looks at me. Tears are streaming down her withered face. She seems so old.

"You bastard! Why did you do this?" Her face hardens. She leaps at me. I have no time to react. She grabs me by the throat, pushing me to the ground. Suddenly a shot of pain races from my guts to my brain. It's unlike any physical pain I have ever felt.

She is pulled from me by two large men. "Holy shit," one shouts. "This bitch is crazy!" She's clutching a bloody box cutter. As the men wrestle her to the ground, I quickly pull myself up, get on the bike and pedal away. I steer with one hand, the other holding my side. It feels as if my guts are ready to spill out onto the street.

I quickly look over my shoulder. Lorna is holding the sobbing woman, her dark eyes watching me as I pedal frantically away.

The cut is shallow. Nothing serious, but it hurts like hell. I should go to the emergency room. I may need stitches. The wound is a pink, perfectly smooth line from my lowest rib on my right side to my navel. It has stopped bleeding but the skin around the wound is a deep pink. It hurts to move. I

do my best to bandage the wound, wrapping gauze and medical tape around my whole abdomen. It's harder than I expect.

When I'm finished, I step away from the mirror to get a better look at the bandages. I've used too many.

In the reflection, just over my shoulder I can see the doll lying on my bed. Its dead eyes glare into my back, its legs opened wide. I can see it smirking at me, amused at all the things I have done to myself.

In the mirror my eyes go wild.

Bill stands in my doorway for about a minute before saying anything. I pretend to ignore him, act as if I'm too busy dressing the doll's vagina to take notice of him. I can see he's nervous. His face is redder than normal. He steps inside my office and closes the door behind him. I don't look up.

"We need to have a talk, Kevin." He's not carrying anything. He doesn't look directly at me until I stop ignoring him. "I don't suppose you heard what happened over at Vixen."

Vixen Studios was trying to cash in on the latest development of the love doll fetish. It seems that some people love our dolls so much they can't get off to anything else. Vixen was in the middle of filming an all FantasyGirls porno when the hair of three of the dolls fell out completely. The dolls had been custom made. I worked each one of them last week.

"We've also had several complaints from customers that their dolls have not been meeting our standards. Clumps of hair are falling out with the slightest pull."

I sit up straight in my chair. I look Bill right in the eyes. "Maybe they shouldn't be so picky. After all, they're fucking lumps of plastic."

Bill looks away. “People pay a lot of money for high quality love dolls. We have a reputation to keep.”

“You know, your customers are closet necrophiles.”

“I don’t care what you think you think of our customers, Kevin,” Bill bets out between flustered breaths. “For the past few weeks your work has been doing down hill. You don’t even seem interested in what you’re doing.”

I glare at Bill, his face becoming as pink as the plastic genitals I have been forced to stare down everyday for the past two years.

“We can’t let this keep up,” Bill continues. “We’ve lost close to a hundred thousand dollars to the faulty dolls you’ve been putting out. This isn’t acceptable, Kevin.”

I lean back in my chair, masking the angry forcing itself up my throat. “You know what, Bill? Fuck you and fuck your overrated blow-up dolls. I quit.”

A small gasp escapes Bill’s cracked red lips. “Fine. Get out.”

I sit at my workstation for a minute, taking in what just took place. I glance to the doll on my desk, the white eyeball of a clitoris glares at me from the pink slit. I soon learn that a silicon vagina is not very resistant to a pair of barbers’ scissors.

Ever since the incident, I haven’t seen Gloria at the gas station as I ride by after work. I’ve just ridden past the station, unable to face Lorna or spend time in that parking lot. I’ve had nightmares where I wake up and feel something in my bed. I pull back the sheets to find the kitten between my

legs; its head twisted completely backwards, blood spurting from its tiny mouth. I taste acid in my thoughts as I near the station.

I lose my balance as I look, hopefully, for Gloria. The front tire slips on some loose dirt and as I fall I feel two separate levels of dread. The first level is the instinctual dread of the damage the fall will cause. The second is the same dread I felt when Gloria tore into my side. I manage to get my hands underneath me. The gravel and pavement rip into my palms. Embarrassed, I push myself up, untangling my legs from the fallen bicycle. I'm unhurt with the exception of my palms which are slowly bleeding from dirt-filled abrasions.

I walk my bike over to the dumpster, guiding it with my wrists as my palms fill with blood. I hide the bike behind the huge brown dumpster. Next to the steel shell I notice a small nest made from rags and strips of cloth. A small pile of dry cat food waits next to a small stone with the word "Charlie" scribbled on it in permanent marker. A stack of old magazines, curled by rainfall, waits before the makeshift chair of a cinder block and plywood.

I avoid Lorna as I walk into the station. It's no use. I have to walk right past her to get to the bathroom. "Are you okay? What happened?" I tell her I'm fine as I close the bathroom door.

My palms are covered in bright red blood by the time I reach the sink. The blood looks like something used in horror movies, almost a cherry red. The sink's cold water stings my palms as it washes away the stage blood seeping from my hands. With the small bits of gravel removed, my hands do not seem to be too awfully damaged. The bottoms of my palms are white with loose layers of skin, the rest of my hands blushing with irritation.



I emerge five minutes later. A woman gives me a dirty look as she slips in behind me, dragging a squirming toddler. I walk to the counter. To Lorna.

“Haven’t seen you around here lately,” Lorna says as she removes the wrapper from a roll of paper towels. “We don’t have any bandages here. Use these until you can get something better.”

I nod and take the roll of towels from her. I take a quick inventory of the first aid supplies still available in my apartment. I flinch at the thought of cleaning my palms with peroxide. I wrap the towels around my palms. I use a lot so that it won’t hurt to grip the bike’s handles, but not too much that my fingers are restricted.

“I saw Gloria the other day,” says Lorna, breaking the silence. “She was down on the east end. She was panhandling.” She takes the towels from me and puts them behind the counter. “She never asked for money when she was with us.”

I nod. My head is heavy with shame. “I’ll see you around,” I tell her as I begin to leave.

“Be careful on that bike,” Lorna calls to me.

I stop in the doorway. Through the glass door I look to the bench Gloria once sat at. I remember her innocence and the innocence she cradled in her arms.

“Hey, Lorna,” I say as I return to the counter. I swallow, nod and smile. “What do you say we get some coffee sometime?” I freeze in a grin I hope is charming. I feel possessed.

Lorna leans on the counter, resting her head in her small right hand. She’s wearing red nail polish. “I don’t think my boyfriend would like that too much, Kevin,” she says quietly.

I jerk out a nod and a small laugh. A boyfriend. Of course. I make my embarrassment known but I keep the disappointment hidden. It will erupt once I step away from her.

Lorna straightens up and glances around the station before looking back to me. She smirks, her lip piercing flipping over. “Just coffee wouldn’t hurt. I get off at seven.”

“I’ll see you then,” I say with a voice that does not feel like me own.

I turn away from Lorna and walk to the door, ready to step outside and welcome the coming spring.